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JPRS L/9104

21 May 1980

Near East/North Africa Report

(FOUO 18/80)



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NEAR EAST/NORTH AFRICA REPORT

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INTER-ARAB AFFAIRS

ORGANIZATION OF GAFSA ATTACK DESCRIBED

Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 23 Apr 80 pp 40-46

[Article by Souhayr Belhassen and Habib Boulares: "How the Gafsa Coup Was Organized"]

[Text] On 27 January 1980, a group of armed men attacked the city of Gafsa in Tunisia. It was quickly learned that they had come from abroad; armed by Libya, they had infiltrated into this part in the South West of Tunisia through Algeria. The attack failed quickly. The men of the commando were taken before the State Security Court and were sentenced to stiff penalties; 13 among them are still looking forward to execution since their appeals had been turned down. Patiently, our correspondent in Tunis reconstructed the long preparations prior to the "coup" of 27 January. The story we present here in the following pages is terrible. It shows essentially that all of the persons involved were trapped and caught in a fatal machine. The resultant mess certainly constitutes food for thought. It is with this purpose in mind that we are publishing this story.

Principal Personalities Involved in the Operation

Mohamed Abdelmalik, alias Shakib, a captain in the SM (Algerian Military Security), in charge of the supply caravans going to the POLISARIO [Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el Hamra and Rio de Oro].

Abderrazzak, a captain in SM, the first Algerian "contact" of Ezzeddine Sherif.

Beshir Shaarun, secretary-general of the BAL (Arab Liaison Bureau) at Tripoli, the Libyan official in charge of supplies for the POLISARIO and the "contact" for Ezzeddine Sherif.

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Amara Dhau Ben Nail, a Tunisian, a refugee in Libya, the mainspring of the FPLT (Progressive Front for the Liberation of Tunisia).

Ezzeddine Sherif, a Tunisian, organizer of the Gafsa operation.

Ahmed Mergheni, a Tunisian, military commander of the Gafsa operation.

Mohamed Salah Merzuki, a Tunisian and a line-passer.

Ammar Mliki, Tunisian, line-passer.

Salaheddine Gram, Tunisian, refugee in Algeria, "contact" for Ezzeddine Sherif in Algiers.

The visit by Algerian President Chadli Bendjedid to his Tunisian counterpart Habib Bourguiba on 2 April (JEUNE AFRIQUE, No 1006) had wiped away the unfortunate effect of the Gafsa attack (on 27 January 1980) on relations between their two countries. Warned from the very first day onward as to the participation of Algerians in the preparation of the coup, the authorities in Algiers had solemnly promised to proceed to an investigation. In return, the authorities in Tunis decided completely to conceal this aspect of the affair, allowing only the part played by Libya to come out into the light of day. The State Security Court, which tried the defendants in Tunis, sat behind closed doors whenever Algeria was mentioned.

The desire not to do anything that could poison relations between these two neighbors is obvious on both sides. The visit by Chadli Bendjedid constitutes striking proof of that. Moreover, it proves that the Gafsa affair, started up while Boumedienne was still president, was continued without the knowledge of his successor whose good faith is not doubted.

This might also explain the "dime-store novel" aspect revealed by the facts in the case. In revealing this to the public, JEUNE AFRIQUE is not trying to feed some kind of bitter debate but instead wishes to help public opinion learn the necessary lessons from this misadventure. Too many bad habits have been adopted by the intelligence services which want to play at being sorcerer's apprentice. They have excessive leeway which in the end causes them to harm their own government.

In this affair, the Libyans wasted close to 20 tons of war materiel, the price of 62 airline tickets, one ton of tea to pay the smugglers, DM20,000, F60,000, plus 4,000 Libyan dinars in cash. The Algerian intelligence services advanced the costly little sum of \$120,000 to the commandos and four times 100,000 Algerian dinars to the smugglers. All of that and only a miserable mess to show for it: 48 dead at Gafsa, about 120 wounded, considerable material waste and 15 death sentences.

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Not only is the regime still in place, but the Gafsa attack triggered a rise in patriotic feelings in Tunisia where the various opposition groups, without in any way denying their demands, affirmed their solidarity with the government, their devotion to the country's independence, and their condemnation of foreign intervention; but one must believe that Tunisia, in North Africa, creates the image of an easy target which is why the Gafsa attack was mounted under the surprising conditions which we are now learning about.

That the number one individual responsible for the operation, the Tunisian Ezzeddine Sherif, after 10 years of forced labor and several more years of wandering from one city to the next and from one country to another, thought that he could get the Tunisian people to rise up with the first burst of fire can be explained by his ignorance as to the real situation in his country (JEUNE AFRIQUE, No 997). But that the intelligence services of two neighboring countries, theoretically well informed, for 2 years were involved in the most detailed preparation of an operation which cost them tons of arms and considerable sums of money--that is indeed something. Here we might of course think of the "Bay of Pigs" where the American CIA learned to its dismay that it could not overthrow the regime of Fidel Castro by landing a handful of Cuban emigres.

The thing that strikes us above all in the Gafsa affair is the combination of contradictory elements: the long duration of preparations and the improvisation of the operations as such, the "professional" manipulation of the commando chief by the intelligence services and the blind confidence which those same services seem to have given him the moment he agreed "to play the game." They could not possibly be unaware of the limitations of his capacities as a commander, nor his lack of knowledge as to what the situation in the country really was because, at a given moment, he was promised that he would be put in contact with opposition members throughout Tunisia. Now, it sufficed for that man to announce to his "handlers," in Tripoli or Algiers, that he had 500 men to open up the weapons depots and the strongboxes for him without any difficulty!

Who fooled the others in this unlikely triangular operation of dupes? Ezzeddine Sherif, the Tunisian? Beshir-Shaarun, the man in charge at the Libyan BAL? Capt Mohamed Abdelmalek, alias Shekib, of Algerian Military Security? In all of this hindsight coming out of this cheap novel, only the military specialist Ahmed Mergheni and his lost soldiers, recruited in Lebanon and Libya, were duped from one end to the other.

Mergheni is a fighting man. He knew of course that the issue was to overthrow the Tunisian regime. But he became involved in the operation only as a manager of weapons, as an instructor of men, and as a field commander. Arriving at Gafsa, he was astonished that he did not find the promised 500 men whom he thought he was going to train, organize, and lead in

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battle. He carried out his "contract" by occupying the Ahmed Tlili barracks, outside the city, with his men. But since capturing a military post is not the same thing as taking over an entire country, he tried to escape when he realized that there was no revolt and no fighting men in Gafsa. He quickly understood that the operation, militarily speaking, was a bloody failure.

The other three--Sherif, Shaarun, and Shekib--could not have been totally fooled. They apparently, each of them, wanted to play the game to the end. The first of them believed that, with weapons and money from Libya, he could create a resistance nucleus in Tunisia which would get Algerian political support. Throughout the entire trial, he kept repeating that he was in cahoots with the Algerians and not with the Libyans, who, according to him, were just the middlemen. The second individual, knowing nothing about the personality of Sherif, pursued a transparent Libyan policy: an armed revolt, in Tunisia, without any leading political figure, would prepare the ground better for a merger of Tunisia and Libya. As for the Algerian Shekib, his case appeared more complex. Was he playing the Algerian game with respect to Tunisia or was he injecting considerations of Algerian domestic politics into his calculations? One is certainly justified in asking oneself this question as one carefully keeps track of the operation's preparation.

Chekib became involved in the entire affair early in 1976; he assiduously cultivated Sherif for one year, making him work for the POLISARIO; introduced him to Col Slimane Hoffman, of SM; and he hired him on to prepare the insurrection in Tunisia. And when--after Boumedienne had died--Algerian policy changed toward Tunisia and when Slimane Hoffman, in all probability, was no longer "in on the coup," Shekib himself continued (with the approval of just exactly who in Algeria?). More serious than that--for his country--he kept a portion of the weapons in Algeria, urging Sherif to persuade the Libyan Shaarun to believe that this cargo had arrived in Tunisia!

From the very first day onward, we said, in this magazine (No 997), that the role of the Algerians remains yet to be described. From the very first day onward, President Chadli Bendjedid assured the Tunisian emissary that Algeria was not at all involved. Now, there were entirely too many specific points, dates, names, weapon shipments, and money given for exchange at the office of the president to accept the idea that the Algerian intelligence services were completely "out." Was the newspaper EL MOUJAHID unaware as to who had attacked JEUNE AFRIQUE so grievously? If that was the case (and this is possible), then the arrest, by the Algerian authorities, of captains Shekib and Abderrazak should have produced more humility in it. If that is not the case, then the facts provide a response which is far from being in line with the official story and even less so with the aspirations of the peoples.

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The affair as a matter of fact began in December 1977. Ezzedine Sherif, born at Gafsa in 1929, a teacher until 1972, sentenced to 10 years at hard labor for having participated in the abortive plot designed to overthrow Bourguiba, was released in 1972 and found refuge in Libya in 1975; he was then taken over by the Libyan BAL under the name of Nasrallah Jaber and then Hady Nasr; after March 1976, he ran supply caravans to the POLISARIO, starting from Azizia, South of Tripoli all the way to Ouargla, in Algeria, where they were turned over to the Saharans who took them on to Tindouf.

On the Libyan side, it was Beshir Shaarun, secretary-general of the BAL, who personally supervised the operation until Ghadames. On the Algerian side, Captain Shekib of SM, then picked up the thread. From one end to the other, Ezzedine Sherif provided continuity. This was a tough job where he lost sight of the whole thing. But he had no choice. After the Libyans had refused his request to let him become a teacher again, he left for Algeria in December 1975. He was received by Captain Abderrazak, of SM, who left him no choice but to work for the POLISARIO. From the moment on, Sherif came into contact with Captain Shekib, the Algerian officer in charge of supplies for the POLISARIO.

Up to that point, one can understand the line of reasoning of the BAL and the Algerian SM. Here was a 47-year old man who spent 10 years in Tunisian prisons and who had a serious reason for wanting to get back at the Tunisian regime. Why let him work as a simple teacher when, psychologically speaking, he was ready to become an active opponent? For that, it was enough to prepare him politically and it was Shekib who addressed himself to that task starting in March 1977, when Sherif had an eye operation and was no longer able to resume his work as a Saharan caravan operator.

To get him once and for all to resort to direct action against the Tunisian regime, a meeting was arranged between him and Hoffman in December 1977. From that moment on, Sherif, probably flattered, accepted the suggestion and Operation Gafsa began. All fired up, he did not even realize that, after Boumedienne's death (27 December 1978), Hoffmann was no longer "on the inside." If he had known, he would have realized that the Chadli administration had started a rapprochement with Tunisia. But the operation had been under way for a year already.

After spending some time in Tripoli and after discussions at the headquarters of BAL with Beshir Shaarun, who agreed to supply the weapons, Ezzedine Sherif returned to Algeria in March 1978. Captain Shekib had prepared the necessary contacts for him to sneak the weapons into Tunisia. The chain ran through a member of the SM at Constantine, by the name of "El Haouem"; an employee of the Djebel Onk mine, by the name of Ali Maizia, who lived at Bir el-Ater, on the border between Algeria and Tunisia; a

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farmer at Bir el-Ater, by the name of Younes Brahima; an Algerian line-passer with the last name of Hdhiba, tying in with a Tunisian line-passer by the name of Mohamed Salah Merzuki, living on the other side of the border, at Skhirat, governorate of Kasserine.

In some way, the chain was "tested" immediately: Ezzedine Sherif, alias Hadj Naar, secretly entered Tunisia in March 1978. He went to Gafsa, established contact with Sheikh Larbi, an old cell mate. The latter, old and sick, could only serve him as a contact; he then introduced him to Touhami Krimi who declared himself ready to recruit men for "an armed revolution."

On his return to Algeria, Sherif asked Captain Shekib for money and got \$120,000 from him; that money was exchanged into Tunisian dinars through Colonel Abdeljelil, of the management office of the office of the Algerian president. Here is a little episode which, to say the least, is rather odd: the money was believed to have come from the Algerian treasury, so why did Shekib first of all give him dollars, before himself accompanying Ezzedine Sherif and a Tunisian journalist who was a refugee in Algeria, a man by the name of Salaheddine Gram, in order to change this sum of money into Tunisian dinars? Did he want to fool the office of the Algerian president by making it believe that the money belonged to those two Tunisians? Did he want to show them that the office of the President was directly concerned with their undertaking? Mystery!

Several days later, the money, "exchanged on the Marseille market," was picked up again (in dinars) by Gram and given to Sherif who returned to Tunisia by the same route. From here on in the connections were assured: Marzuki, the Tunisian line-passer, 29 years old, short, lively, very dark-skinned, dry like a prune, nasty like a fox, turned out to be so greedy that he risked everything. He grasped the scope of a juicy operation such as this one and, to help him in case of need, he introduced into the lineup one of his neighbors, a smuggler like himself, by the name of Ammar Mliki, 35 years old, tall, strong, owner of several pieces of land at Skhirat, plus a Peugeot 404 and a driver by the name of Mohamed Tahar who in turn participated in the operation. Krimi served as relay at Gafsa and a portion of the money was hidden in his place (but he died a natural death a short time thereafter). Merzouki also introduced a mountaineer from the Gafsa region by the name of Brahim Azuz, who promised to recruit the fighting men and who received sums of money to set up accommodations for the future guerilla fighters--"who are unemployed people," as he told Sherif.

In short, in April 1978, everything seemed to be in place in order to beat the drums for a "people's revolution": the weapons promised by the BAL, the money furnished by Shekib, the line-passers who had been tested, plus

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two manpower recruiters, one in Gafsa and the other one in the surrounding countryside.

But the BAL also had a line of its own for the purpose of sneaking weapons directly into Tunisia from Libyan territory. By the way, it considered that line to be safer and the Tunisian line was simply supposed to take delivery of the crates of equipment in the South East in order to ship them on to Gafsa. Thus, eight crates were sneaked in during May 1978 after all kind of vicissitudes but they were discovered by the Tunisians in July on account of a difference between two gangs of smugglers. From that moment on, the Libyan line was cut off and only the line from Algeria to Tunisia was used because it had already worked out successfully three times for Ezzedine Sherif. But the weapons still had to be shipped from Tripoli to Bir el-Ater in Algeria. And this is what the "Qadhdhafi Trail"-- which is used in supplying the POLISARIO--was supposed to be employed for. But that required the blessings of the Algerians.

That brings us to the second episode of trouble on the Algerian side: Captain Shekib agreed to use this route but introduced Sherif to two Algerian smugglers from Ouargla who were supposed to set up the Tunisian "end" from the "Qadhdhafi Trail." Why, if his bosses were in agreement, did a captain from SM resort to the use of smugglers instead of conducting the operation with his own agents? Why, if there was not sufficient cover, did he agree to open the way in person with the help of his own pass? On the Libyan side, in any case, the facts are perfectly clear: not only did Beshir Shaarun, of the BAL, furnish the weapons but he escorted them to the border in a manner which can no longer be considered official.

A first convoy started out in December 1978. At Sath, on the border between Algeria and Libya, Beshir Shaarun delivered 5.5 tons of weapons to Ezzedine Sherif who saw to it that they were transported by the Algerians Ayat and Gdich on a Berliet truck all the way to Bir el-Ater. Now, December 1978 was the time when President Boumedienne was near death at Algiers. Shekib, help up in the capital, was not at the rendezvous. The convoy nevertheless continued on to the North and was stopped! Sherif and his two Algerian companions were thrown into prison by SM at Algiers.

Now comes the third rather odd episode on the Algerian side: Shekib managed to spring Sherif from jail and, when the latter left prison, he picked him up, driving a Citroen CX; but he could not avoid a symbolic sentencing of the two Algerians whom he himself had selected for this operation. Besides that, either he had failed to get the weapons out of customs, or he kept them for an undisclosed purpose, but he urged Ezzedine Sherif to persuade Beshir Shaarun that the weapons were in good condition and arrived safely in Tunisia. This was done. Sherif should have stopped to think at that moment and should have made sure that the Algerians were really behind the operation. But he did nothing of the

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sort.

A second convoy was organized on the Libyan side for the start of August 1979. This time, two trucks were loaded at Tripoli and headed for Sath with Ezzedine Sherif, Beshir Shaarun, a Libyan line-passer, and a Sudanese driver on board. At Sath, the two Algerians in the first convoy, released after the election of Chadli Bendjedid with the help of a presidential amnesty, came back on board under the direction of Shekib who this time was present from the very beginning. The trucks of the Algerians headed North via Ain-Amenas, Hassi-Messaoud, and Tuggurt. One of the trucks finally reached a certain Basti whose farm was close to the Tunisian border, in the region of Bir el-Ater and would serve as a depot. The second truck was taken by Shekib to Tebessa and its cargo, like that of the first convoy, never reached Tunisia; this is the fourth troubled episode in the activity of Shekib.

A third convoy was organized in December 1979. The same people followed the same route, with only one truck now loaded with 200 crates of arms. That brings up the fifth trouble episode: on the one hand, the convoy was stopped twice at Hassi-Messaoud and Tuggurt but Captain Shekib showed his pass and was able to continue; on the other hand, upon arrival in the Tebessa region, the cargo did not get into Tunisia because of the existence, on the Algerian side, of a very strict customs team assigned there after a rather petty affair involving the smuggling of tin cans. This cargo never reached Tunisia either!

All things considered--apart from the first eight crates of weapons shipped from Libya and discovered by the Tunisian authorities--only the cargo of one truck out of the four following loads, which on three occasions took the Algerian route, actually arrived in Tunisia. It is not astonishing that the "fighting men," once installed at Gafsa, in January 1980, asked for more weapons and sent a shopping list quickly to Tripoli.

Those fighting men, in contrast to Sherif, were rural types. They knew how to handle weapons because they did their shooting either in the ranks of the POLISARIO or in Lebanon with the Palestinian Resistance or, finally, in the Libyan "Foreign Legion" made up of Arab opposition members and immigrants.

Their real leader is not Ezzedine Sherif but Ahmed Mergheni. Born at Zarzis in South Eastern Tunisia in 1941, Mergheni impresses people first of all by virtue of his physique: he is a strapping fellow with a moustache and a beard and a smooth-shaven skull; he is sure of himself and speaks with assurance. "I am a born revolutionary," he told the State Security Court. He went to grade school and then held several jobs, such as laborer, mason, apprentice with an apple fritter vendor, and coffee house waiter. For him, there are no frontiers; he crosses them secretly into

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Libya or Algeria. He managed to get himself arrested in Tunisia, once for theft and another time for illegal border crossing. In 1972, he joined the FPLT at Tripoli which is run by a Tunisian refugee by the name of Amara Dhau Ben Nail. He took on a dangerous mission: blowing up public buildings in Tunisia.

Mergheni secretly returned to his home country in 1974 but was arrested and sentenced to five years in prison. After getting a presidential pardon in 1976, he went to Libya, again secretly. Ama Dhau Ben Nail then persuaded him to get training in the ranks of the POLISARIO for 5 months. He then went back and forth across the Sahara, unknown to the Algerian authorities. In July 1977, in response to an appeal issued by the Libyan authorities, he volunteered for training at the Jedaim camp, for battle against Egypt. There, the "Tunisian brigade" consisted of almost 500 recruits, some of whom would later accompany him to Gafsa in 1980. But, after the training was over, the mobilized men were sent to the Palestinian camps.

Mergheni remained in Libya where he spent the entire year of 1978. But in January 1979 other prospects opened up for him; Amara Dhau Ben Nail, on his return from a trip to Lebanon, informed him that he had met Tunisians fighting in the ranks of the Palestinians who were ready to join in an armed action in Tunisia. The FPLT might thus be able to assemble the men needed. Amara Dhau Ben Nail--who had been in contact with Sherif ever since the latter arrived in Tripoli in 1975--informed Mergheni that Sherif was preparing an operation in Tunisia and that he had received weapons from Libya for this purpose. It seemed necessary to him that the FPLT should be present in the revolt which was taking shape and that coordination should immediately be established. Contact was established and Ezzedine Sherif met Ahmed Mergheni for the first time in April 1979.

Mergheni: "Where are the 500 Men?"

This episode clearly illustrates the situation in which certain existing opposition movements find themselves: some have weapons but no men (such as Ezzedine Sherif) while others have ideas and initials but few men and no weapons (such as the FPLT) or there are men who fight but have no weapons except within the context of Palestinian resistance. All of them however hoped that they would be in on the operation to be conducted in Tunisia. This explains why--upon the announcement of the Gafsa attack--several communiques, issued by unknown or little known organizations, were published in certain capitals.

The meeting between Sherif and Mergheni only added to the confusion. That seems evident today in the light of what they told each other. Sherif informed Mergheni that there were difficulties in getting the

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weapons into Tunisia but he did not tell him that there were no troops! On the contrary, he told him that he had 500 men, roughly, and that he needed instructors. Until the very day of the attack, in downtown Gafsa, Mergheni kept asking Sherif: "Where are those 500 men?" But in April 1979, the affair was all lined up; Mergheni, a brawler, above all, was ready to rally the "specialists."

He left for Lebanon in May, met some Tunisians who turned out to be marxists whereas he is anticommunist; he recruited some snipers, several of whom had police records. But that did not matter just so long as they knew how to handle weapons. Sherif would have no part of the FPLT or the Libyans; he demanded that the fighting men recruited by Mergheni go directly to Algeria.

But the latter--held up in Lebanon during his second trip in October 1979, where somebody stole his money, where he was attacked by Tunisians fighting in the ranks of the Palestinian Saika and thrown into prison--was able to get out of the Lebanese wasps' nest only with the help of the Libyans. And so he met ten recruits, in Tripoli, not in Algiers, in December 1979. They had gotten there ahead of him with the first group. About ten days later, the recruits from Lebanon and Libya, with Sherif and Mergheni, entered Tunisia through the line established by Marzuki and Mliki which had already been used for arms shipments. The rest we know. In the night from 26 to 27 January 1980, the attackers took the Ahmed Tlili barracks (outside Gafsa), they were stopped in front of the barracks downtown, they attacked the police station and other buildings, and they were then crushed by the Tunisian army which dispatched reinforcements to the scene. Result: 48 dead, about a hundred wounded and a large-scale crisis in the Maghreb.

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INTER-ARAB AFFAIRS

BRIEFS

KGB INVOLVEMENT--According to the latest reports on the 27 January attack in the Tunisian city of Gafsa, by a commando which had come from Libya via Algiers, it has been confirmed that the operation was to have several "stages" as far as its organizers were concerned. On the day after the commando went into action, a Libyan aircraft delivered 200 "agricultural student instructors" in Algiers. "We want to visit your agriculture schools in the eastern part of the country" (near the Tunisian border). The decision was put up to Algerian Agriculture Minister Colonel Salim. He did not want to send the "Libyan instructors"--who, according to an eye-witness, looked very much like military men disguised as civilians--back. But he would not allow them to go to the Tunisian border either: "Our best agriculture school, which people from all over the world are visiting, is at Mostaganem, in the western part of the country. That is where you can see most of the things that interest you." These "reinforcements," sent to help the Gafsa attackers, according to people in the know tend to indicate that the operation was conceived, on the very highest level, in reality by the Libyan contacts of the Soviet KGB [State Security Committee] and the East German intelligence services. Objective: create a diversion for the occupation of Afghanistan by making trouble in the Maghreb. (See p 40 of our document: the Gafsa story.) [Text] [Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 23 Apr 80 p 30] 5058

ALGERIAN QADHDHAFISTS ARRESTED--Qadhdhafists at Algiers. Two officers of the Algerian special services, by the name of Shekib and Abderrazak, were arrested on demand of Chadli Bendjedid, Algerian chief of state, because of their participation in the pro-Libyan coup at Gafsa, in Tunisia. They supposedly are tied in with FLN [National Liberation Front] secretary-general Yayaoui, known for his pro-Soviet positions. Yayaoui is a friend of Ahmed Shahati, chief of Libyan intelligence services. Shahati, who in particular supports the separatists on Caledonia and La Reunion, in January was received by high French officials in Paris. He went there in his capacity as leader of the People's Congress--the only party in Libya. [Text] [Paris VALEURS ACTUELLES in French 21 Apr 80 p 25] 5058

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RADIO FREE GAFSA--"Kill, Strike, Massacre!" That was the new slogan put out by "RADIO GAFSA LIBRE" which broadcasts daily in the morning and evening but never at the same time nor on the same wavelength. These two short broadcasts have been resumed ever since the Tunisian State Security Court sentenced 15 members of the Gafsa commando to death. The radio demands "ten heads of Tunisian personalities" for each death sentence. [Text] [Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 23 Apr 80 p 48] 5058

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AFGHANISTAN

CASUALTIES, DEATH TOLL OF SOVIET ARMY REPORTED, DISCUSSED

Paris LE NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR in French 31 Mar-6 Apr 80 p 51

[Article by K.S. Karol]

[Text] Officially, there is no war in Afghanistan. However, people are dying there; and there are many rumors circulating in Moscow about the atrocities of which the Soviets are victims in that country.

Gen Nikolay Kostenko, aged 54, died "doing his duty." However, the obituary published last week by the newspaper KRASNAYA ZVEZDA, the organ of the Soviet Army, does not indicate where he died. General Kostenko, having served in the North Caucasus Military Region, is reported to have died in Eritrea where Ethiopian troops, assisted by Soviet advisers, have just suffered a serious setback in the battle of Neckfa. Even more prosaically, he is said to have been a victim of an accident in his barracks in Rostov-on-the-Don or in Vladikavkaz, although every general in active service always dies "doing his duty." However, for Soviet readers, there seems to be no possible doubt: General Kostenko was killed in Kabul or, in any case, somewhere in Afghanistan.

In the big Soviet cities, beginning with Moscow and Leningrad, a campaign of rumors on the dramas and atrocities of the Afghan war is developing with increasing intensity. Francois Schlosser has already written in this very newspaper (LE NOUVEL OBSERVATEUR, No 799, dated 3 March 1980) about the zinc coffins which are being brought back to the capital and which are said to be the source of sad conversations among Muscovites. If we are to believe the most recent news reports, the military authorities, still of a mind not to bury a single Russian soldier in Afghanistan, are no longer sending back the bodies of victims--who purportedly are often atrociously mutilated--but rather their ashes. By performing on-site cremations, the Soviets are in fact saving space: They are now only sending small metal urns to the families, which contain the remains of their relatives. Instead of the dead, the AN-12's, of the air force are transporting the wounded back to Russia, particularly to Odessa, Tbilisi and Tashkent. According to one whispered account, the Soviet army has already had 1,200 killed and over 6,000 wounded in the 3 months of the Afghanistan occupation.

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However, this campaign of rumors is perhaps not as innocent as it seems at first. In principle, according to a friend recently returned from Moscow, all news reports on the zinc coffins, metal urns and disabled soldiers of the Afghan war come from the olkhoznyy rynok--the peasant market. The capital of the USSR is supplied with fruits and vegetables--this fact has been known for a long time--by enterprising peasants from the other side of the Caucasus, principally Georgians and Armenians. Today the republics of the Caucasus are said to be particularly affected by the Afghan expedition, because a large part of the troops engaged in the battle reportedly come from this region where most of the wounded are sent.

However plausible this report may be--which explains why General Kostenko and several others, who were listed in the obituary column of KRASNAYA ZVEZDA, commanded units of the SKVO and ZKVO*--it is not entirely convincing. The report furnishes too many details about the ferocity of the enemy and places heavy emphasis on the mutilation of the bodies of the dead and, at times of the wounded. By recounting that the Afghans are profaning the bodies of their victims in some manner--and disfiguring the wounded--is not an effort being made to awaken in the Soviet people the instinct for revenge, the desire to give this "feudal" and barbaric Islamic adversary a lesson?

For my part, what strikes me is that the current stories greatly resemble those I had heard in the USSR in 1941 at the beginning of World War II when Stalin was making an effort to arouse the warlike spirit of his troops and the people by spreading the rumor everywhere that the Germans were atrociously mutilating their prisoners of war. Today, the situation is not entirely the same, if only because officially there is no war in Afghanistan. Soviet television, on a program called "Vremya" ("Time," which is the equivalent of "The Event"), has even shown news clips of the fraternization and common efforts of the Soviets and Afghans in Kabul. However, we might well ask ourselves whether the authorities, to counterbalance this propaganda which is intended to be reassuring, are not themselves resorting to the present campaign of rumors to mobilize the people by means of this clandestine device.

Gas and Napalm

According to most observers, the effect created by reports on the coffins, metal urns and disabled soldiers is inclining precisely in this direction. "We must put an end to those fanatic Afghans," the man in the street concludes in substance, according to supporting testimonies from Moscow and Leningrad. And it seems that we are now witnessing in Moscow the awakening of the patriotic spirit which runs something like this: "Victory at any price." Under the circumstances, it little matters whether the rumors

* Russian abbreviations for the military regions of the North Caucasus and the Trans-Caucasus.

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about the war victims come from the "rynok" or from the propaganda services of the Soviet army. For the moment, everything is transpiring as if the Kremlin had decided to "shoot the works" [mettre le paquet] in Afghanistan, in the hopes of stabilizing the Babrak Karmal regime. It has been left primarily to the people's democracies in Poland and Hungary to keep the lines to Western countries open, with a view to a future conference on security and other negotiations on global detente, which would involve the "neutralization" of an Afghanistan which is already normalized. However, in the meantime, as Andrey Gromyko put it: "Our soldiers are the only guarantee of the neutrality of the Kabul government."

However, Leonid Brezhnev's wager may prove to be very risky. The military offensive which is now in progress will perhaps permit the Soviets to control the terrain in Afghanistan, but not to conquer the population. For rumors about this war are not only circulating in Moscow: Others are circulating throughout the Moslem world where there is certainly no talk of zinc coffins, but of napalm and gas which are said to have been used by the Soviet army against the Afghan guerrillas and civilian population. Therefore, it is not "normalization in 3 months" toward which events are evolving, but rather toward a long-range test of strength which threatens to render illusory Western and Eastern European efforts to keep out of the conflict.

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ALGERIA

ABDESSELAM'S ECONOMIC POLICIES UNDER FIRE

Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 2 Apr 80 pp 22-25

[Articles by Philippe Simonnot: "Abdesselam: Another Ben Salah?"; Abdelaziz Dahmani: "The Man Responsible"; and Samir Gharbi: "The Gas Example"]

[Text] Will Belaid Abdesselam, once the brains behind Algeria's industrialization process, end his career in court? It is not impossible, for the current leaders may well need a scapegoat to bear responsibility for the failure of an economic policy they all supported in the recent past but which was drafted, led and defended by Abdesselam.

The situation is reminiscent of conditions in Tunisia at the end of 1969 with the fall of the powerful planning minister, Ahmed Ben Salah. While they may not have developed a new economic strategy capable of solving the immense problems ahead of Algeria, at least officials are now in agreement on turning their backs on the policy embodied by Abdesselam since 1965.

Defense of Minister

Heavy industries will yield to consumer and processing industries. Small and medium-size enterprises will no longer be neglected to the benefit of major state firms. Instead of concentrating investments around a few poles, an attempt will be made to substitute regional development. Once again, agriculture will receive priority. The working and exportation of oil and gas will be more cautious and more oriented toward preserving the reserves of the subsoil. Covering the evolution of employment needs will be the "prime political objective." Finally, leaders will try to "free" the country from the "mechanisms of dependency on the world market," from both the industrial and financial standpoints.

And yet, independence had been the key word in the policy followed by Abdesselam at the head of the Ministry of Energy and Heavy Industry for 12 years. For his accusers -- and this is the cardinal sin and insult -- the policy led to greater dependency and must be repudiated. But is it a policy to take the opposite course of a policy?

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A few days after the death of Houari Boumediene (27 December 1978), Abdesselam, who since April 1977 had been only minister of light industries, nevertheless put his last chips on the table. In two documents which JEUNE AFRIQUE has managed to obtain, he attacked his detractors, who would become even more vindictive with the disappearance of the president, as he had foreseen.

The first document, dated 17 January 1979, is entitled "The Situation Is Far From Catastrophic." In it, the minister defends what was his life's work. Naturally, he admits, the ratio of indebtedness (service on the foreign debt compared with exports) "may have reached and exceeded the threshold of 15 to 20 percent," but Algeria does not run any risk of insolvency because of the receipts to be attained from development projects.

On the contrary, he explains, one must "maximize the use of foreign loans" because thanks to world inflation, "buying now by borrowing is undeniably more advantageous than postponing purchases." And the policy should be continued so as to "build a bridge over the period of the coming years, which will be difficult in terms of our balance of payment, a bridge allowing us to cross the period without having brought into question the achievement constituted -- from the standpoint of our economy -- by the speed attained by development." In passing, he includes this troubling detail: "Many members of the government and even the chief of state have all, at one time or another, committed their efforts and staked their credibility in order to obtain the money needed from other governments or major banks."

Impracticable Bridge

"The characteristic of all human action," Abdesselam continues, not ingenuously, "is that it is imperfect and perfectible by definition, because perfection is one of the attributes belonging to God alone." Almost word for word, the statement of his Tunisian counterpart, Ahmed Ben Salah, in 1970!

The plea then turns to the attack and Abdesselam pinpoints his enemies: "The Central Bank," he writes, "has always ignored the guidelines that are the basis of the economic and particularly industrial development policy set forth by the government." Then "The motives behind the Central Bank of Algeria's actions (....) have nothing to do with a concern for obtaining better financial conditions, but are much more similar to the attitude of a person who in fact seeks new 'schemes' to check development to which he pays only lip service and supports only reluctantly."

This Central Bank is not only devious, but perfidious as well, since "it has maintained business relations with an American bank that turned its back on us at a particularly difficult time (negotiations over the first gas liquefaction project). The magnanimousness of the Central Bank toward that American bank seems to be continuing."

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It is perfidious and what is more, favorably inclined to the former colonial power because the exchange system it practices for the Algerian dinar ends up benefiting products from France and canceling out the effects of the drop in the dollar. Abdesselam sarcastically remarks: "It is as if the competitiveness which the French complain of not having beyond their borders were generously granted to them in Algeria." He then wonders -- and this is the final cut -- "whether our Central Bank feels fully concerned about and committed to the socialist option of our country."

Ten days later, in a document dated 27 January 1979, the minister of light industries returns to the attack, this time accusing the Ministry of Finance: "It may also be that in the financial departments, there are persons, some occupying posts of high responsibility, who endeavor to prevent the execution of a policy whose orientations and objectives they do not share." This opposition is labeled as "veiled, artful and virulently directed against the development policy which the country has followed for 15 years now, and particularly against the industrial aspect of that development."

We now know that Abdesselam lost this last fight, first of all, because the figures argue against him. It is recognized in Algiers that the ratio of indebtedness is over 30 percent, that the "bridge" he wanted to build to the future is impracticable, that the entire gas policy has to be reviewed (see page 24 ["The Gas Example"]). Nor is that all. The agricultural situation -- for which, one must add, Abdesselam is not directly responsible -- is disastrous. In 1978, for example, Algeria imported four times more grain than in 1968. Housing conditions have deteriorated terribly. Port and road infrastructures are overloaded and congested.

In short, 15 years of effort, authority and, one has to say, suffering, have resulted in a dilapidated economy unable to satisfy the basic needs of a population growing at a runaway rate (there will be at least 27 million Algerians by 1990 and 36 million by the year 2000).

But the most serious thing of all is undoubtedly the accusation made by Abdesselam against the regime's "financiers" -- an accusation that perhaps hastened his fall and for which he may have to pay dearly. "Are the 'financiers' truly socialists?" he wondered. Is the counterpolicy they were trying to follow compatible with the options of Algerian socialism? And then, if they are the ones who truly have the socialist truth, as they now claim, then what is one to say about Abdesselam?

The Man Responsible

"The Maghreb? That's a bunch of crap! When Algeria is producing steel by millions of tons, Morocco and Tunisia will still be making tomato concentrate...." "France? You'd better look to the United States or the USSR!" Rarely has a man from the Maghreb had such all-consuming ambitions for his country. That man is Belaid Abdesselam.

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Born in 1928 in the region of Setif, an ardent nationalist, from the age of 17, he was acquainted with French prisons, where he spent a year. A medical student in Algiers and then Grenoble, he became honorary president of the UGEMA (General Union of Moslem Students of Algeria). After serving as an instructor at the FLN school in Oujda (Morocco), he became political adviser to Ben Khedda, president of the GPRA [Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic] and in 1962, economic affairs delegate to the provisional executive. When Ahmed Ben Bella came to power, he excluded him for some time. But as early as 1964, he became chairman of the board of SONATRACH (National Company for the Transport and Marketing of Hydrocarbons).

However, greatest success of this pale man with the cold glance and robust health is having won over Houari Boumediene, who had just overthrown Ahmed Ben Bella, convincing him that Algeria should embark upon an ambitious policy of industrialization. Perhaps he underestimated the obstinacy of daily conditions, ways of thinking and underdevelopment. And yet, Houari Boumediene, of peasant origins and generally distrustful, allowed himself to be persuaded.

Belaïd Abdesselam's trump card was political: He was not liked by Ahmed Ben Bella. Becoming minister of energy and heavy industry in July 1965, he reigned for 12 years as an absolute master over the empire he was succeeding in building. But in April 1977, he experienced his first falling out of favor: He was named to head light industries. Then, in 1979, President Chadli Bendjedid placed him at the head of an economic committee of the FLN. During the last 2 years under Boumediene, Belaïd Abdesselam was increasingly criticized, he, the man who had once succeeded in breaking down all opposition.

He is reproached for having taught himself economics. And his accusers scoff: "Algeria's economy had fallen very ill." But behind the criticism of the working people of Algiers is also concealed a kind of irritation with the man...and his style.

Under his direction, SONATRACH had become a tentacular enterprise that was almost unmanageable, a "state within a state." Sid Ahmed Ghazali, who in 1965 took Belaïd Abdesselam's place at the head of SONATRACH, was one of the first, in 1979, to pay for the questioning of the choices of "the father of heavy industry" -- a little like prerevolutionary Iran -- who wanted to build a modern, strong and respected country as rapidly as possible.

Belaïd Abdesselam's way of life, on a par with his economic ambitions, did not contribute to his popularity either. It is said that one of the officials in his entourage had to carry his attache case and prepare his cigars. Since he had difficulty sleeping, he would requisition a whole series of suites in the best hotels of New York, Tokyo or London so that no noise would disturb his rest. Although he lived a high life, it was in Moscow that he was the most comfortable, obsessed as he was by all things

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gigantic and the industrial successes of the USSR. But he never succeeded in convincing the Soviets to support one of his great but scarcely profitable projects: shipping Algerian iron from Gara Djebilet (in the region of Tindouf) by the Mediterranean.

During the 12 years of his reign, Belaid Abdesselam's stakes were undoubtedly too high, a little like the gamblers who go to the casino checkbook in hand and shout "Banco!" at every throw of the dice, but he lost the throws.

Gas Example

SONATRACH has just undertaken the task of renegotiating all the liquefied natural gas (LNG) sales contracts made with American and European companies, particularly El Paso (United States) and Gaz de France. The main objective is to double the price, which would go from \$3 to \$6 per 1,000 cubic feet (about 28.3 cubic meters).

Signed during the time of Houari Boumediene by Ahmed Ghazali, then chairman of the board of SONATRACH, the contracts made it possible to launch an ambitious gas policy whose cost turned out to be too high and technology too difficult to master. The first liquefaction complex at Arzew (LNG 1) did not start up until 1978, 5 years late at a cost four times higher than estimates (\$2.4 billion). While the LNG 2 complex is being completed, Algiers now seems hesitant to finish the third complex, whose site has just been opened.

Preference would now go to the delivery of gas no longer in the liquefied state, but gaseous, by way of a gas pipeline. This would be a less costly solution given the cost of building liquefaction plants and methane tankers, especially since the capacity of the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline (Algeria-Europe via Tunisia and Sicily), whose completion is planned for 1981, could be increased from 12 to 18 billion cubic meters per year.

Expelled from the government, Ghazali is now being questioned by Minister of Energy Belkacem Nabi, who reproaches him in particular for having poorly negotiated with El Paso in 1969 for the annual delivery of 10.5 billion cubic meters of LNG for 25 years. According to Nabi, the indexing clauses provided in the contract are very inadequate. If the contract is not revised, the price of 1,000 cubic feet of LNG would remain "ridiculously low," going from \$1.15 to \$1.75 between now and 1982. An investigative committee set up on 8 March by the National Assembly has begun to examine the contract's negotiating terms. Will this be the beginning of a real "trial" of the heavy industrialization policy? For the time being, Ghazali defends himself by stating that in 1969, SONATRACH did not have a broad choice of partners. It was not until more recently that it could diversify its sales to European countries.

Today Algeria, whose reserves of natural gas not associated with oil are estimated at 3 trillion cubic meters (the equivalent of 170 billion barrels

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of oil), has become the world's leading exporter of LNG. The United States and West Europe place great hopes in those reserves. Algeria's supplies of LNG will represent 25 percent of French consumption around 1985 (9 billion cubic meters per year), compared with 12.4 percent in 1979 (4 billion cubic meters).

On the basis of a calorific equivalency, LNG (at the price of \$3.00 for 1,000 cubic feet) is much less expensive than crude oil (at the current price of \$37 a barrel). According to SONATRACH, doubling the price of LNG and indexing it on the price of crude would make it possible to obtain "a fair and realistic price." Such a price would make heavy investments made in the gas sector (some \$20 billion) profitable and would penalize waste.

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EGYPT

OPPOSITION TO NORMALIZATION WITH ISRAEL DESCRIBED

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 21-27 Mar 80 pp 27-29

[Article: "Opposition Rejects Sadat's Normalization and Zionization of Egypt"]

[Text] While efforts to create an opposition movement outside Egypt are stumbling along, the country is witnessing, perhaps for the first time in its recent history, positive internal efforts to create a widely based opposition to al-Sadat's Government. In particular, the opposition is directed against normalization of relations with Israel, Zionization and the progressive separation of Egypt from the larger Arab nation. Indeed the public endorsement of a manifesto condemning normalization by a group of leftist and rightist leaders marked an important juncture in the development of this opposition front.

The first sign of an organized opposition in the making was an invitation [to journalists] to attend a press conference. An Egyptian journalist working for REUTER relates that on Saturday morning, 23 February, 1980, an invitation to attend a press conference, addressed to the director of the REUTER Cairo office, was received. The invitation was sent by Member of the People's Assembly Muntaz Nassar. In it, Mr Nassar asked the director of the REUTER office to attend a press conference sponsored by opponents of normalization to be held at Mr Nassar's office at 12:30 p.m. on Monday, 25 February, [1980].

Within one-half hour, the REUTER office was flooded with calls from other foreign news agencies and correspondents inquiring whether REUTER had received an invitation to the press conference. It soon became apparent that the invitation had been sent to all Egyptian and foreign agencies, including radio and television.

In conformance with regulations, REUTER's director called the State Information Office to report the invitation and to request permission to attend, a standard procedure applicable to all foreign agencies and correspondents. The official responding to the call "advised" the director to decline the invitation on the ground that the press conference was viewed as anti-government, and that attendance would jeopardize REUTER's working relationship with the government. He urged the director to ignore the invitation altogether.

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REUTER soon discovered, however, that American Television as well as a British Television mission--which happened to be in Cairo--in addition to a number of British, Dutch, American and Belgian correspondents and journalists have decided to accept the invitation. Subsequently, REUTER again called the State Information Office to inform them that they cannot abide by the office's advice as long as other agencies would be represented at the press conference. The official attending to the call surprised REUTER by permitting the agency to attend, provided it would agree, as others reportedly had, to play down the importance of the conference in its report. This condition, according to the State Information Office, was necessary in view of the dangers to the security of the state that the press conference could engender. When REUTER argued that the condition to downgrade the press conference was not consistent with its supposedly dangerous potential, the official said he knew little about the details of the conference and was simply relaying what senior political and security officials had told him.

Meanwhile, several political and security meetings were taking place in government offices. The meetings were attended by Vice President Husni Mubarak, Interior Minister Ismail Nabawi, the President of the People's Assembly, Dr Sudqi Abu Talib, the Minister of State for the Presidency, Information and Cultural Affairs, Mansur Hasan, Deputy Prime Minister for People's Assembly Affairs and Secretary General of the National Democratic Union, Fikri Makram 'Ubayd. Vice President Husni Mubarak used these meetings to upbraid the officials on behalf of the president for failing to learn of plans for the press conference before it was announced and to urge them to do their utmost to abort it.

The Minister of the Interior, Ismail Nabawi, was unable to shed any light on the planned press conference, other than that he had learned of a flurry of activity involving Muntaz Nassar, former Revolutionary Command Council member Kamal al-Din Husayn, and political writer and National Coalition Party leader Lutfi al-Kholi. He said that, since Mr Nassar was their lawyer, frequent visits by the two to his office appeared normal. According to Mr Nabawi, Mr Nassar was representing Kamal al-Din Husayn in the legislative elections case and Lutfi al-Kholi in the case of the confiscated magazine AL-TALI'A. He explained further that, the two men being on opposite sides of the intellectual and political spectrum, there appeared little likelihood of a joint undertaking on their part. He did recall, however, that the two men together with Mr Nassar had occasionally visited a number of prominent individuals who are politically inactive. And while these individuals may sympathize with the opposition, they would not participate in public anti-government activity.

The Minister of the Interior expressed the view that the [pending] press conference in all probability would not exceed a declaration by some leftist disaffected intellectuals of their opposition to normalization. He said further that it was too late to stop the conference. The upshot of these government meetings was a decision to have the minister of information

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pressure the foreign press to ignore the conference altogether or to downgrade its importance, and to mobilize a contingent of pro-government journalists to attend and spoil the affair. Simultaneously, a group of National Democratic Union sympathizers--a "hatchet group" led by the party's Cairo Secretary General, 'Abd al-Latif Baltiyyah and Mrs Nawal 'Amer--together with a group of internal security and secret police agents would surround the office of Murtaz Nassar to intimidate would-be participants. We note here that the press conference had already received much publicity, beginning on Wednesday evening, 24 February, [1980].

By 10:00 a.m. on Monday, 26 February, Mr Nassar's office, located on the first floor of an office building on Jowad Husni Street (named for a popular resistance hero who died in the 1956 war with Israel, following the nationalization of the Suez Canal), was surrounded by security agents and the party "hatchet group" who tried to prevent people from entering the building. The large crowd gathering outside, aided by the presence of correspondents and television crews, who were photographing the activity, compelled the agents to disperse. Mr Nassar's office which could accommodate 50 people was soon crowded with 300 journalists and citizens. Two Israeli correspondents accompanied by Ahmad Zayn, deputy editor of AL-AKHBAR, and Mukarram Muhammad Ahmad, deputy editor of AL-AHRAM (who had just returned from a press visit to Israel) attempted to enter the conference room but they were discovered and barred.

At 12:30 the conference began with an opening statement by Mr Nassar, in which he announced the formation of a national coalition to oppose the new Israeli "invasion" of Egypt. He described the coalition as nationwide embracing the entire spectrum of political and patriotic forces regardless of party affiliation, age, or political orientation.

Mr Nassar then read the coalition's manifesto which was addressed to the Egyptian people, referring to it as the "Egyptian People's Declaration." The surprise came when the names of the people involved in the coalition were revealed. The disclosure marked the first time in the history of the Egyptian national movement that leaders of the July Revolution as well as [former] prime ministers have openly joined ranks with politicians of diverse parties and political orientations. In the former group were Kamal al-Dirv Husayn and 'Abd al-Latif Baghdadi; in the latter were Muhammad Sudqi Sulayman, who supervised the construction of the Aswan High Dam and the nationalization of foreign companies after the 1956 Suez War, and who later served as prime minister under President Nasir before and after 1967, and 'Aziz Sudqi, who, as minister of industry, headed the country's industrialization program after the July Revolution and later served as prime minister in 1972 under President Sadat. The list also included a group of former ministers from the Sadat Government: Muhammed 'Abd al-Salam al-Zayyat, Dr Murad Ghalib, Engineer 'Abd al-Khaliq al-Shinnawi, Dr Yahya al-Jamal, Dr Mustafa al-Jabali, Dr Ismail Sabri 'Abdallah, and Dr Zaki Hashim, who is a noted legal expert and owner of the largest legal firm representing European and American companies in the Middle East.

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Among the writers on the list were the rightist Jalal al-Hamamsi, and the leftists Lutfi al-Kholi and 'Ismat Sayf al-Dawlah. The religious groups were represented by Dr Ahmad Sayf al-Islam Hasan al-Banna, son of Shaykh Hasan al-Banna, the founder of the Moslem Brotherhood, Shaykh Salah Abu Ismail, member of the current People's Assembly, and Shaykh Muhammad Nasr 'Ashur and 'Adel 'Id, former members of a prior People's Assembly.

Wafd Party signatories included 'Abd al-Khaliq al-Shinnawi, former treasurer of the dissolved party, the noted lawyer and head of the Alexandria Office of the Human Rights Association Ibrahim Tal'at, and Ahmad Nasir, member of the governing board of the Lawyers Association.

The Socialist Labor Party was represented by its Secretary General, Rif'at al-Shahawi, and Hasan 'Urfah, the secretary of the Alexandria section.

The Nasirites included Kamal Ahmad, Mahmud Zaynhum, Mamduh Taha, and Dr 'Aziz Sudqi, who described himself as a "Nasirite Egyptian Arab."

From the Coalition Party the list included Dr Khalaf Allah, Milad Hanna, Abu al-'Aziz al-Hariri, Lutfi al-Kholi, Isma'il Sabri, and Yahya al-Jamal.

The National Front Party (in the founding stage) was represented by Mumtaz Nassar, Dr Mahmud al-Qadi, Muhammad Abu al-Fadl al-Gizawi, and 'Ityat al-Shafii.

One outcome of the developing opposition to the Israeli invasion and normalization of relations is the entry into the political arena of new forces with special expertise such as Salah 'Abd al-Majid, the former vice president of Cairo's Criminal court, which in the past has settled numerous political cases in favor of democracy and freedom. Others in this category include Muhammad Fahim Amin and 'Abd al-'Aziz Muhammad, members of the governing board of the Lawyers Association, and Mahfuz 'Azzam, a lawyer. These three are instrumental in keeping the Lawyers Association steadfast in defense of democracy and civil rights. Of note, too, is the presence of Dr 'Abd al-Munim Kharbush, representing democratically oriented university professors. Dr Kharbush is the president of the Faculty Association of Alexandria University.

One day after the "People's Declaration" was made public, President Sadat hastened to attack the opposition movement in an interview with Israeli journalists, who had been shaken up by the strength and cohesiveness of the opposition. President Sadat described the movement as a "rejection front."

Responding to President Sadat's attack, Mr Nassar said: "We are not a rejection front in the strict sense that the president attributes to us. We are a front of democratic, Egyptian Arabs, availing ourselves of our constitutional right to defend ourselves and our country against an Israeli invasion under the guise of normalization."

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The preceding quotation came in response to a question put [to Mr Nassar] by Mukarram Muhammad Ahmad, deputy chief editor of AL-AHRAM, who wanted to know whether the founding of the opposition front was not a violation of the law, the constitution, as well as of the referendum held in April, 1979, to ratify the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

Addressing the same question, Mr Kamal al-Din Husayn said: "As one of the 40 signatories of the Peoples Declaration, I endorse Mr Nassar's answer. Furthermore, I wish to add, solely on my own, that the referendum you refer to was a fraud, and I challenge you to quote me in your official government-serving newspaper."

Lutfi al-Kholi also intervened and remarked: "It is our natural and constitutional right, irrespective of the validity of the referendum, to call for changing what he [Mr Sadat] has described as the will of the people. No people throughout history has freely permitted the occupation of its land or separation from its [mother] nation."

Responding to a question by Abu Kaff of AL-MUSAWWAR (a subsidiary of AL-HILAL books) as to the source of the data contained in the Peoples Declaration, alleging that Israel plans to cheat Egypt out of 2 billion cubic meters of Nile water, when, according to his information, such a feat was scientifically impossible. Mr Nassar's answer was that nothing was impossible to modern technology. He added that while the project may be costly, it was not impossible. He went on to identify President Sadat as the one who made the promise of Nile water to Israel and said his data was based on Israel's announced plans, and, in particular the plan designated "Israel in the year 2000."

Thus was announced the creation of the National Front. The no nonsense announcement challenging normalization of relations with Israel came on 25 February, 1980. The birth of the National Front marks a new stage in Egypt's political struggle.

Numerous sources have since confirmed that the Egyptian Government has decided to employ violence, even assassination, to liquidate the leaders of the new front. Similarly, the new political movement is determined to confront the government on a wide front. It will base its case on three fundamental and linked issues, which are of interest to the masses:

--Opposition to normalization,

--Economic and social exploitation as evidenced by rampant poverty,

--Opposition to the usurpation of constitutional rights and democratic liberties which are threatened by the [proposed] Law of Shame.

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It is expected that the new party will announce the addition of 60 new adherents from the political groups which have sponsored the People's Declaration as well as from other groups that have indicated a desire to join the party, bringing the number of signatories to 100. Simultaneously, the effort to collect signatures from among the masses continues. An official of the new party said the goal is to collect 1 million signatures before the end of 1980.

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LEBANON

IMPLICATIONS OF SYRIAN ACCORD WITH LEBANESE REGIME EXPLORED

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 21-27 Mar 80 pp 22-24

[Article: "Flirtation Between Damascus and Sarkis Is Arousing al-Huss' Jealousy and the Resistance's Concern"]

[Text] The cards have suddenly been shuffled again in Lebanon. Talk about the accord has disappeared, to be replaced by talk about blowing up political figures by remote control and about wars between armed organizations for trivial reasons in the midst of heavily-populated quarters. But why has the smell of gunpowder suddenly arisen this spring in Lebanon?

The cards were first shuffled 45 days ago in Beirut, when political forces, the Palestinian resistance and diplomatic circles were at a loss to explain Syria's decision to regroup the Arab peace-keeping forces in Lebanon. The cards were then shuffled again a few days ago, when these same parties could not foresee the ramifications of the relationships emerging from the redeployment decision, or of the dimensions of alliances anticipated to develop on the Lebanese scene, and the effect of the latter on the internal political equilibrium, the nature of relations with the PLO, and the general condition of the crisis in the Middle East.

So far, it is clear that there has been a basic change in the Syrian point of view towards the situation in Lebanon and the Lebanese government in particular. Such a change does not seem extraordinary when compared to the change which took place in the [Lebanese] regime's position following announcement of the principles of an accord and its adoption of a number of basic measures which will make room for greater mutual understanding between Beirut and Damascus.

Syrian and Lebanese attempts to understand the circumstances and attitudes of each other, which accompanied this change, restored to the relationship's framework a character which had been missing for the last 2 years, namely compatibility of attitudes and outlook towards future developments in Lebanon and the Arab world.

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This compatibility led to loss by political forces in Lebanon of many of their trump cards, including credibility of their role in the dialog on the Lebanese question. Some people felt that Syria began to look like it represented the nationalist forces in Lebanon, just as the Lebanese regime began to look like it spoke for the "Lebanese Front." This amounted to a shuffling of the cards and to confusion on the part of political forces in Lebanon with regard to defining where they stood on what was happening and determining the end results of the developments.

Two parties might appear to be quite detached from the current mutual attraction [between Syria and Lebanon]. The first is Lebanese Prime Minister Salim al-Huss, and the second is the Palestinian resistance. These two sides have tried to determine the ramifications of the Syrian regrouping decision from the standpoint of new and expected relations and alliances, but have actually been unable to arrive at a clear definition of the situation.

The two parties in question are not remote from the circles of power in Lebanon and Syria. Therefore, their search for the ramifications of current developments looks like it might be linked to a search for a basic role to play in what is happening, or to an effort to ward off prospective dangers.

Al-Huss' Isolation

Prime Minister Salim al-Huss knows a great deal about present activities on the Lebanese scene, but he feels that part of what is happening is taking place far away from him, and that the Lebanese government is trying to penetrate the wall of confidence with Damascus without him. The visit of Minister Fu'ad Butrus to Damascus, prior to the announcement of the accord, ended with what seemed to be a demonstration of welcome for the foreign minister.

Prime Minister al-Huss was unable to explain such significant Syrian harmony two weeks later, during his own visit to the Syrian capital, when he heard all the officials directing bitter criticism at Butrus, President Sarkis, and the Lebanese army.

Al-Huss returned at that time with the impression that the fact that no criticism had been directed at himself implied that he was capable of playing the role of mediator. The prime minister assumed this role and tried to mediate between the various groups, and participated with President Sarkis in the consultations for the accord. He drew up the principles for the accord and pursued them paragraph by paragraph until they saw the light of day.

After Butrus' visit to Damascus came the withdrawal of Arab peace-keeping forces from some areas in Eastern Beirut. The prime minister considered this in accordance with the announcement of the principles of the accord.

But after that, during Army Commander Gen Victor Khuri's visit to Damascus, the contacts between President Sarkis and his aides and the parties of the

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"Lebanese Front," and the secret delegations to Damascus, he began to feel that some web was being woven deep within the relations between the Lebanese and Syrian governments of which he knew nothing but the outward aspects.

So that his questions would not lead to doubts and convulsions, Prime Minister al-Huss tried to carry on the contacts for the sake of the accord, in the hope that he would learn what was going on in the meetings with political forces in Lebanon, and what was being conveyed by the delegations to Damascus.

In time, however, al-Huss began to feel that other factors were cropping up on the Lebanese scene which would have a practical effect on the course of the Middle East crisis, and that the Palestinian resistance might also be directly affected by this situation.

Al-Huss contacted the resistance leadership in an attempt to find out their views of the dimensions of this rapid Lebanese-Syrian rapprochement. In his questions, he was trying to find out whether the resistance was alarmed at some of the things which were happening, or whether what had happened was not yet a danger as far as they were concerned.

The Palestinian Resistance's Uneasiness

The Palestinians usually say that any attempt to solve the Middle East crisis without the Palestinians will automatically fail, and that any settlement excluding the PLO shows shortsightedness on the part of its originators. Developments over the past 10 years have proven that the Palestinians have successfully overthrown any settlements which ignored their rights and countered all attempts to isolate, strangle or eliminate them as a liberation movement.

This remark is being reiterated today by resistance leaders in Beirut, amid feelings that new attempts are being made to establish a settlement in the region in which their role will be under tutelage. The resistance has rejected these attempts before, under the slogan "Palestinian independent decision-making," and they are rejecting them today under the slogan "It is our problem and we will determine its solution."

During the past few weeks the Palestinian resistance has experienced some very critical days, amid its doubts about what is happening. It has turned and twisted in the hope of discovering the purposes behind the indications which have appeared on the Lebanese scene.

The feelings and doubts of the resistance have been deepened by basic changes in the attitude of President Sarkis and the "Lebanese Front" towards Syria, which has made the resistance consider establishing relations with Damascus, fearing that one of the purposes behind the new Lebanese rapprochement with Damascus is an attempt to create a crack in relations with the PLO, which is committed to a unified leadership and a single strategy in the Arab-Israeli struggle.

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From the start, the Palestinian resistance has resorted to the approach of dealing passively with events, and in its activities it has not even tried to acquire new positions. It has continued as usual in the midst of the contradictions surrounding it, and has been satisfied with attempting to ward off some possible dangers.

There have been successive meetings to study some of the indications which had recently appeared in Lebanon and on the Arab scene, including the Palestinian resistance's being forced to expand the territory it controls in parts of south Lebanon.

Palestinian sources say that the regrouping of the Syrian forces has actually forced the resistance into confrontation with all the national movement parties and also into playing the part of policemen over them.

These sources also say that the resistance is now even more exposed to attacks by Israel, not that the "red line" which stretched from al-Zahrani to the Beirut city limits has been raised, making it possible for the Israelis to bomb all the southern coastal areas without fear of running into Syrian forces.

In this respect, Arab diplomatic sources say that the resistance is afraid that their being forced into undertaking this task will cause their presence to become an accomplished fact in a large part of southern Lebanon, which might lead some people to accuse them of trying to take over Lebanese territory.

The resistance also is afraid that Lebanese and Arab public opinion will turn against them. In this respect, Abu Iyad (Salah Khalaf) says that the war which was fought in Lebanon in 1975 and 1976 was a Lebanese war, and that the Palestinians were just one of its aspects. He also says that if the attempts at accord succeed today, the Palestinian military proliferation will without a doubt mean the possibility of a Lebanese-Palestinian war and consequently the consideration of the Palestinians as a party to domestic Lebanese affairs, a situation to which the Palestinians do not want to return.

What Did the Palestinians Find in Damascus?

It is hoped that these fears will not hamper the Syrian stand on the ongoing regrouping operation. The Palestinians know that this regrouping has obvious justifications in the confrontation with Israel, and they know that Damascus would never have made such a decision if it had not felt that the spreading-out of its forces to this extent in Lebanon would deprive it of the military capability of reacting to possible Israeli attacks.

But the Palestinians feel that the practical results of the Syrian step place new responsibilities on them which they could do without.

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The resistance leaders went to Damascus in an attempt to find out something which would enable them to coordinate their affairs, especially in light of the Syrian decision to regroup the Arab peace-keeping forces. The Palestinian leaders became aware of the following points during their contacts. First, there is no truth to what American diplomatic circles are circulating about Syria's giving up its support for the Palestinian resistance as a result of discussions during Palestinian-American contacts late last year. Second, it is not true that there is a Syrian feeling that the PLO has had a part in encouraging the establishment of new Arab alliances and axes. Third, for the PLA forces to remain when the peace-keeping forces are withdrawn would imply that Syria would insist on helping to make sure that no major security breaches are left for the resistance. Palestinian sources say that this stand has not helped the resistance overcome its fear, in view of the fact that in effect it would be forced to assume responsibility for the PLA's activities once it loses its role as part of the Arab peace-keeping forces. These points have alleviated the resistance's doubts considerably, without actually leading to its basic understanding of the nature of what is happening, because the role which it usually assumed through a mutual understanding with Damascus officials is absent.

Obscurity After the Card Shuffling

Let us return to the card-shuffling on the Lebanese scene. The Palestinian resistance is pursuing its contacts with the "national movement" forces and parties from the standpoint of coordinating with them so that they--the parties--will make the decisions about stationing the army in their regions.

National movement sources say that this stand was accompanied by contacts with Damascus which resulted in delaying the regrouping of the Arab peace-keeping forces from the Timas lines in the capital and from the two key barracks in western Beirut, and from the basic vital utilities and official organizations in the capital.

Even though there was no confirmation of the cancellation of the Syrian regrouping decision, such a delay apparently came on the basis of a request from the resistance to be given an opportunity to make the necessary contacts with Lebanese army leaders concerning the security situation and the functions which might be assigned to the Lebanese army.

Through this activity, the resistance may have found an access to the settlement which is being drawn up in Lebanon. But Prime Minister al-Huss still feels that this settlement will never come to life unless clear bases for mutual understanding among the Lebanese are drawn up, not the accord between the Syrians and the "Lebanese Front" which some government figures want.

Al-Huss feels that this Lebanese-Lebanese understanding will be the actual entry point to another mutual understanding with the Palestinian resistance, and to the translation of the positive aspects of the Damascus visits into continuing coordination and cooperation.

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Al-Huss says that if the positive aspects continue to be based on circumstantial variables as is the case now, the moving sands in Lebanon might engulf many of them, especially since the cards of the game are still in the hands of the armed groups.

All these possibilities could happen, unless Arab and international circumstantial variables are stronger than everything else going on, because, as Former Prime Minister Rashid Karami says, in this case the cards which have dropped will find bigger cards growing in their place.

Perhaps this is what frightens the Palestinian resistance, as well as Prime Minister al-Huss.

Will the Security Explosions Wipe Out the Accord?

The deteriorating security conditions in Lebanon have preoccupied various political circles in past weeks, and officials and party leaders are studying indications that an extensive relapse is possible, which would destroy the deliberate steps taken towards the accord and abort the stumbling contacts to achieve it.

The security incidents began without any political reasons, as usual. They succeeded each other in concentric circles, one of them barely ending before another one began, without the Lebanese being able to pick themselves up. This series has not ended at the boundaries of the "Lebanese Front" regions, but has also greedily encompassed the national movement's regions.

Are the individual incidents each time enough to ignite the straw between this group and that one? Are disputes over the theft of an automobile or the purchase of meat pies from a bakery enough reason for using RBG bombs, heavy machine guns and bombs in the capital's residential quarters? or are these disputes the sparks which determine the date for pre-meditated clashes?

Fear and dismay has encompassed all the leaders, and security precautions have been taken to protect party leaders and leaders of political forces in various regions. The movement of political leaders has become a "military operation" supervised by special units which comb the streets and inspect the building and make sure that there are no automobiles along the streets which could be transformed in the wink of an eye into TNT carriers to be detonated by remote control, as happened with Bashir al-Jumayyil and Kamil Chamoun, and with the bomb in the dais in west Beirut, which almost claimed as its victim Ahmad al-Khatib, leader of the Arab Lebanon Army.

The strange thing about the security relapses is that fingers are always pointed at intelligence, and at agencies which want to harm Lebanon without anyone being able to discover them. Lebanese military circles and the investigations which have been conducted into party agencies say that some of the factors behind these clashes are not the work of party militias,

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but of hands plotting against them. In some instances where the clashes broke out without anyone knowing the reason, there may be proof that there are some people who want to ignite the fuse so that the fire may burn the fingers of political parties and forces.

Government sources say that Israeli intelligence might appear to be the party most capable of concocting the continual attempts to assassinate political leaders. These sources add that there is a similarity between various such operations which were directed at some resistance leaders or some "Lebanese Front" leaders.

Meanwhile, Palestinian resistance sources are inclined to adopt a theory of incipient war between Arab intelligence agencies on Lebanese soil. These sources say that the resistance is constantly trying to control its people and to forestall all attempts to force them into diversionary operations and clashes on the Lebanese scene. For this reason, it has called on all its agencies to find out what is behind these biased attempts.

Arms, Money and Clashes

The following recent indications are feared by official Lebanese sources. First is the unloading of two weapons ships at al-Dabiyah and Juni last week, to the account of the Liberal Nationalists' Party (Chamoun's party). The significance of these weapons lies in their arrival more than 8 months after the arrival of similar weapons for the liberals, while the Phalangist Party is constantly receiving arms shipments through illegal harbors.

Second is the existence of proof that Chamoun's party is receiving large amounts of money, some of which is said to come via Lebanese personalities who had previously made political contacts for the Liberal Nationalists in the Arab world and Europe.

Third, competition is beginning in the quarters of western Beirut between armed organizations subordinate to various Arab regimes; this competition has begun to take on the nature of a continual armed confrontation among these organizations.

Fourth is the Arab peace-keeping forces' hesitation to continue regrouping their forces from the western region, and the Lebanese authorities' possession of information that Syria feels that the situation will get out of hand if the Syrian forces are withdrawn from greater Beirut before acceptable Lebanese military substitutes are created in the national front areas.

Fifth, some political forces have resorted to the method of "fighting and talking" whereby their military activity is equally balanced with political activity, in order to create major reactions in the Lebanese political milieu. Official Lebanese sources say that such attempts usually crop up when the political forces are looking for new positions vis-a-vis variables in the prevailing political atmosphere.

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Walid Junblatt told Yasir 'Arafat, at a meeting of the joint command last week, "As long as the positive elements are not thrown into the present balance, all the negative elements will head the situation back towards collapse."

Today, the positive elements Junblatt is talking about are "a new government or the expansion of the existing government so as to make it one of the parties to the struggle under a commitment to the principles of the accord." Such a proposal might push those who are hurt into the open, or into isolation. This in effect may be what is behind the deterioration in internal security, because the smoke of the gunpowder will obscure good vision as long as the battle continues.

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LEBANON

LEBANESE BUSINESSMEN BUY FOREIGN CURRENCIES

Paris AL-WATAN AL-'ARABI in Arabic 21-27 Mar 80 p 46

[Article: "1979--The Year of Flight From the Lebanese Pound"]

[Text] Even though bank deposits in Lebanon amount to 19 billion Lebanese pounds, the fluidity available to the banking system for domestic credit is only 500 million pounds, because of the strict monetary policy being followed by the Central Bank, which has led to the rise in interest rates to between 12 and 14 percent. This has made businessmen, from merchants to industrialists, protest this rise to Central Bank Governor Shaykh Michel al-Khuri.

By reducing fluidity for the banking system, the Central Bank intends to protect the Lebanese pound from [speculation] by the banks, be it in real estate, where prices have registered fantastic leaps, or in the foreign currency, as shown by the price of the dollar compared to the pound. At the end of last year, the dollar rose to about 3.5 Lebanese pounds, but after the monetary measures it dropped back to 3.3 pounds.

Bankers regard 1979 as the year of flight from the Lebanese pound. This flight had a number of reasons, the most important being the huge rise in overseas interest rates, domestic unrest and the apprehensions of financiers and businessmen regarding military and political developments in Lebanon and the [rest of the] region.

Central Bank figures show that total bank deposits as of 30 November 1979 amounted to about 17.817 billion pounds, as opposed to 13.826 billion pounds as of 31 December 1978. That is an increase of 3.991 billion pounds, or about 28.8 percent. These deposits are distributed as follows:

1. Deposits in Lebanese currency, which rose from 11.2 billion pounds to 12.472 billion pounds, an increase of 1.272 billion pounds or 11.3 percent;
2. Deposits in foreign currency, which rose from 2.626 billion pounds to 5.345 billion pounds, an increase of 2.719 billion pounds or 103 percent.

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It should be noted that the ratio of foreign currency deposits to total deposits rose from 19 percent in December 1978 to 30 percent in November 1979, and was about 33 percent in September 1979. The reason for its drop was the Central Bank's measures, which led to a decrease in fluidity for the banks, and a consequent rise in interest rates to levels close to the interest on foreign currencies.

But these measures aroused the complaints of economic authorities. In this connection, President of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry 'Adnan al-Qassar says, "We have informed the governor of the Central Bank that the rise in bank interest rates on credit, after reaching a minimum of 13 percent, constitutes a roadblock to the growth of economic activity, especially under the difficult security conditions which the country is facing."

Al-Qassar adds, "There are other measures which could be relied on to strengthen the Lebanese pound without hurting the interests of economic sectors."

But the Central Bank will apparently not go back on its measures, which it considers necessary to protect the national currency from the speculation to which a number of banks and some businessmen have resorted, especially since these measures have led to a sort of stability in the price of the pound with respect to the dollar.

Central Bank sources say that these measures will continue as long as there are no actual production investments. At the present time the bank is prepared to give exceptional approval to banking credits for certain production projects, once they are proven to be realistic.

This is what happened recently with respect to the loan acquired by the Sabilin Cement Plant Company, whose president is Walid Junblatt, the head of the Socialist Progressive Party. It amounted to 50 million pounds, and a number of major banks contributed to it, including the Arab Bank, the Lebanese-French Bank, and the National Bank for Industrial and Tourist Development.

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MAURITANIA

BRIEFS

IMPENDING TRIAL OF HARRATINS--Leaders of the Harratans (freed Mauritanian slaves) Movement recently arrested are going to be tried for having attempted to organize demonstrations in several towns announced on 2 April Mr Ould Boukreiss, Mauritanian Minister of the Interior. [Text] [Paris MARCHES TROPICAUX ET MEDITERRANEENS in French 11 Apr 80 p 863] 8696

ADB LOAN AGREEMENT FOR GUELBS PROJECT--Mr G.E. Gondwe, acting president of ADB (African Bank of Development) and Mr Mekhale Ould Sidi, Mauritanian ambassador to the Ivory Coast signed an agreement on 15 February 1980 according to which ADB grants a loan of 5 million &C (e.g. 1,350.9 CFA millions approximately) to Mauritania for the financing of part of the foreign currency costs of the iron ore project of the Guelbs. Loan repayment will be spread over a period of 15 years including 5 years of deferred amortization. The loan had been approved by the Administrative Council of ADB on 23 January 1979. The project concerns the exploitation of a new iron mine at Kedia d'Idjill soon to be exhausted. The total cost of the first of the project amounts to \$451.7 millions that is 376.42 UC millions of which 327.53 UC millions in foreign currency (87 percent of the total cost). ADB already participated to the tune of 5 millions UC in the purchase of material (equipment for primary and secondary extraction). The present loan of 5 millions UC will serve to finance part of the costs in foreign currency for conveying locomotives to carry the ore to the harbour of Noudhibou. Other external sources of financing for the project are: BEI (European Investment Bank), IBRD (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development), CCCE (Central Fund for Economic Cooperation), Fades (Arab Economic and Social Development Fund), the Abu Dhabi Fund, the Kuwait Fund, the Saudi Arabian Fund and OECF (Organization for Economic Cooperation Fund). The implementation of the project will spread over the years 1978 to 1982. The SNIM (National Industrial and Mining Company of Mauritania) which exploits the iron ore deposits of Kedia will be the organization of completion and exploitation of the project. This loan is the eighth granted by the bank group to Mauritania and the third granted to that country by ADB. The total of loans by the bank group, including the present loan, reaches 32.19 million CU, that is approximately 8691.3 CFA millions. [Text] [Paris MARCHES TROPICAUX ET MEDITERRANEANS in French 11 Apr 80 p 863] 8696

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ISLAMIC CONFERENCE AID--The Mauritanian Council of Ministers approved on 28 March a decree project registering the aid of the Islamic Conference for the construction of an orphanage at Nouakchott. This aid amounts to \$125,000. [Text] [Paris MARCHES TROPICAUX ET MEDITERRANEENS in French 11 Apr 80 p 863] 8696 8696

MAURITANIAN-IRAQI FISHING COMPANY--The Mauritanian Council of Ministers approved on 28 March an ordinance project authorizing the ratification of the constitutive contract of a Mauritanian-Iraqi fishing company with a capital of \$20 millions. This contract aims at an improvement in the exploitation of Mauritanian fishing resources according to modern scientific and technical methods. [Text] [Paris MARCHES TROPICAUX ET MEDITERRANEENS in French 11 Apr 80 p 863] 8696

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TUNISIA

NATION FACES SERIOUS PROBLEMS

Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 12 Mar 80 pp 26-28

[Article by Jean-Louis Buchet: "Tunisian Illness"]

[Text] While one wonders in Tunis about the medical necessity of transferring Hedi Nouira to Paris, Mohamed M'Zali--temporarily--coordinates government action. However, a simple change of leader will not be sufficient to solve the grave problems facing Tunisia today.

A president, Habib Bourguiba, forced by age and illness to semiretirement; a prime minister, Hedi Nouira, scheduled to succeed him, hospitalized in Paris; a coordinator nominated for the emergency, Mohamed M'Zali, without great power and one does not know whether he will succeed the successor; a cabinet, finally, consisting for the most part of technocrats without much political talent--there is enough there to cause worry. For an indeterminate time, government action will lack a firm direction, to say the least. But, nevertheless, this is not the essential point.

Let us suppose that Mr Nouira will recover and will be able to take charge again. Or, assuming the opposite hypothesis, that Mr M'Zali will be confirmed and takes over the government leadership, can we expect, in one or the other case, the decisions required by the situation of an ailing country? The very decisions that the responsible people could not or would not take when Mr Nouira was active. As in the case of the Gafsa attack, some weeks ago, the questions raised by the prime minister's illness reveal the Tunisian paradox. The paradox of a country well-known for its political stability, envied for its economic dynamism, which in reality is fragile and seriously unbalanced. This "illness" of Tunisia is that of a regime which has cut itself off from its youth, from the world of labor and from its elite. It requires another remedy than the political games of nominations, successions and demotions.

The young people? They are numerous, unemployed and left to themselves. Some rioted on 26 January 1978. Police raids and national service were the answer to their frustration. Others, mostly from the south, left for

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Libya. Some of them came back, armed, on 27 January 1980, to conquer Gafsa. The luckiest are in college classrooms. They have shown, during the recent weeks, that they did not intend to follow the power blindly. When they are not susceptible to the Islamic current, they lean toward the extreme left, even to Tripoli.

The Dream of a Pluralist Society

The trade unions? In spite of the mistakes of Habib Achour and the previous leadership of UGTT (Tunisian General Union of Workers), they proved their strength in 1977-78. After "black Thursday," poor representative leaders were imposed on them, repression prevailed in the factories, and salaries barely increased. Broken, the movement did not vanish for all that. It can become all the more dangerous as it no longer expresses itself openly.

The elite? Simultaneously with the economic development, which gave the country a combative proletariat, Tunisia made a big educational effort from the moment of independence. It disposes today of a large managerial force, such as few African countries possess. But, these lawyers, engineers, architects, and journalists are not able, either, to use their knowledge to the best effect. They also dream of a pluralistic society on the European model. For years, with a remarkable constancy, they got the answer "we shall see about it later."

And, as if that were not enough, there is the Islamic challenge which is spreading, touching all social classes. The phenomenon is not strictly Tunisian, of course. But it draws its strength from the accumulation of frustrations and appeared more vigorous here than the authorities had been, and moreover more modern. Relatively advanced, Tunisian society thus sees the centrifugal forces building up. At Gafsa, Tunisians took up arms against the regime. Certainly they were made use of by Qadhdhafi. But these men, or at least their leaders, also tried to use Qadhdhafi. If they were disqualified by this recourse to a foreign power, the Gafsa commandos showed that at least a tendency exists in Tunisia--however much in the minority--which holds that armed combat opens the way to change.

Others might follow suit in Libya for sure, but also in France or even in Tunisia. And it is no secret that in the first hours following the Gafsa attack, when the attackers' origin was still unknown, the reaction to mobilize in favor of the regime was small. Among the people of Tunis, the feelings expressed ranged from sympathy for the promoters of a coup against the government to a prudent sitting-on-the-fence attitude. If Libya can become, at any moment, a menace again, it is evidently because Qadhdhafi seeks to unsettle his neighbor. But it is also because Tunisia lends itself to it to a certain degree.

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Neither Dictatorship, nor Democracy: An Explosive Mixture

This weakness, one must admit, is the result of success. Economically, socially, and culturally Tunisia made great strides during the last 10 years--those of Hedi Nour, to be precise. With a GNP of \$1,000 per inhabitant, it combines today the disadvantages of industrialized countries and of underdevelopment. As in Europe, one finds in Tunisia demanding urbanites, eager for knowledge, anxious for freedom, asking for more and more. Also, as everywhere in the Third World, there are the lifelong unemployed, landless peasants, and masses who have nothing to lose and not much that can be given to them.

Faced with this explosive mixture, the authorities did not take a clear attitude. They refused, and it is to their credit, to settle things by authoritarianism, as is often the case in Africa. But neither would they open the sluice-gates, seek citizen participation, accept opposition, or be inspired by Western democracies. This increased vulnerability, since Tunisia is not a dictatorship, the complaints can be heard, but, as it is not a democracy, they cannot be put right. It is an untenable position, comparable to that of many semideveloped countries of Latin America. Tunisia is the first African country to reach that stage. But the Latin American experience proves that a choice must be made. Certain countries were able to lean toward democracy, with definite failings certainly, but true democracy (Venezuela, Costa Rica, Brazil today). Others sank into dictatorship, and what dictatorship (Argentina, Chile etc.)! It is a question of means as well as political will. In any case, it is not possible to stay long between two chairs.

With Nour, it is true, the course was set in the direction of democracy. The decisive move was never taken, but one could think of going in that direction. Liberal in economics by conviction, in politics by training and temperament, the prime minister always sought and succeeded in a large measure to avoid authoritarian pitfalls. Amidst a political class too preoccupied with its prerogatives to be willing to yield in anything, faced with a president too burdened by history and years, Hedi Nour did not lack courage. For example, he is one of the few Tunisian politicians to accept the fact of the trade unions without too many reservations. He never concealed his hope that UGTT would recover its autonomy after its setback. Similarly, he expressed the violence of his feelings when, at the last congress of the PSD [Social Democrats Party] in September 1979, he closed the door to opponents. Some months before, I had asked him what he was waiting for since Tunisia appeared ready for the multiparty system. He answered, not without irritation, that he was prepared to go as far as possible within the framework of the single party. After the classical arguments based on the requirements of development--arguments which he obviously only half believed--he let out finally: "In some years, if conditions permit, we shall go to the multiparty system."

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Judging by the evidence, Hedi Nouira has not been able to go far enough. First, between 1970 and 1975 he tried to assert himself, and then to indicate a tendency, albeit by very small steps. With the hope of running his policy once he had succeeded Habib Bourguiba, Nouira can be blamed for not daring to go the whole way. But, at least with him, one knew where one was going and could hope to get there, even if slowly. The politicians made do with it. Did a problem arise? It would be solved later. Reforms? Postponed...that is under Nouira. Today, when Nouira's position is temporarily empty, it is no longer possible to be content with this.

On the other hand, if the regime was shown incapable of change while Nouira was there, why would it change today? Only a new beginning, a real reappraisal, would allow the Tunisian politicians to seize this opportunity at last. To do a little, like Hassan II in Morocco or Senghor in Senegal--two countries even more backward. The first gave itself the means to wage a costly war for its land and to extract sacrifices from the Moroccans with the help of the main political schools. The second had the clear-sightedness to prepare for himself an open succession by making room for important currents, inspite of the country's deep economic crisis and the extreme poverty. Once more, it is a question of will, imagination and compensations. At that price Tunisia can achieve its historical compromise which would also guarantee its sovereignty. Otherwise, all surprises are possible, including the authoritarian reaction.

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WESTERN SAHARA

POLISARIO WON 'LASTING POLITICAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL VICTORY'

Paris JEUNE AFRIQUE in French 26 Mar 80 p 32

[Article by Raphael Mergui]

[Text] In February, L'OPINION, the daily paper of the government party Istaqlal, announced on the front page the launching of "Operation Badr," commanded by Colonel-Major Abrouk. Aside from the error on the name--understandable because it had been meanwhile changed to Zellaqa--our colleague anticipated the event by a month. But, he had at the same time embarrassed certain Moroccan officials.

The date of the operation's start was supposed to have been kept secret. It was to coincide with a big offensive intended to "clean up" the Ouarkziz mountain range, immediately south of the Oued Draa, inside the 1975 borders. The operation began anyway at the end of February and early March, initiated by the FAR (Royal Armed Forces).

A Military Reverse

Why that date? According to some sources, Rabat was afraid that the POLISARIO would celebrate the fourth anniversary of the SADR at Lebouirate. However that may be, this Moroccan course is an (important) element in the vast cleaning-up enterprise begun by General Dhimi's Ohoud unit last November. The combat zone--the battles took place, according to POLISARIO, from 1 to 11 March--is a varied plain situated between the Ouarkziz range and the Hamada (plateau) which extends to the region of Tindouf (in Algeria). The Ouarkziz has been riddled with Saharan bases for at least 2 years. Its "clean-up" can be done only by bits and pieces by infantry on foot; tanks and aircraft are of little help.

This whole region has a great strategic importance. From these mountain hideouts POLISARIO threatens Tan-Tan and occasionally harries the small towns of Akka and Assa. At the same time, POLISARIO was isolating the fortress of Zag, on the edge of the Hamada; if it fell, the road to Goulimine would be opened to them...

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So what happened at the end of February? The Zellaqa group, reinforced by a party of Ohoud, Colonel Harchi's scout regiment, moved, probably from Tan-Tan, toward the fortress of Zag from which an armored column would have also started which was to join the men of Abrouk. The Moroccan column, if it was really 7000 strong, according to POLISARIO's statements, should have extended itself easily across 100 km. By "squeezing" it, POLISARIO prevented it from climbing the slopes of the Ouarkziz.

In light of communiques published in Algiers and certain other testimony, the Saharan rebels definitely inflicted a military reverse on the FAR by stopping their offensive. This is even more so if the announced figure of 2,000 Moroccan casualties--almost 30 percent of the total force--is, as usual, greatly exaggerated. The absence of precise information does not permit giving any entirely satisfactory explanations for the Moroccan defeat. One of the causes is the low standard of the commanding officers of the Zellaqa group (see JEUNE AFRIQUE No 1000). The military setback was amplified by the silence of the Moroccan Ministry of Information, which only emerged from its torpor to publish an unconvincing communique without dates or figures.

Psychological Shock

The FAR has resumed its cleansing operations. The results of this counter-offensive are not yet known. But already, two lessons can be learned from the latest battles. The first is that POLISARIO has won more than a military success, which might be temporary; it has gained a lasting political and psychological victory, which has had a profound effect on international public opinion. Its perfect information organization has a great deal to do with this. The second lesson is that the numerous and excessive rumors about Chadli Bendjedid's moderation are in danger of no longer being taken seriously--many Moroccans are already wondering whether they are influencing themselves or if they are being influenced about the desire for peace attributed to the Algerian president.

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